Breaking Tradition

The Federally-Built Landscape of the Navajo Nation

Candi Helms

Federal policies and programs of the last 125 years have greatly influenced the asymmetrical constructed landscape of the Navajo Nation as we presently see it. From the 1880s to the 1920s, construction reflected hurried attempts to assimilate the Navajo into the so-called "American" society. The Navajo people were offered stateside goods and forced to send their children to school taught in converted military forts and later facilities that mimicked standard Anglo schools. President Roosevelt's Public Works Administration (PWA) provided for the replacement of these facilities which were obsolete by the 1920s. Although the PWA building program incorporated a few Navajo traditions in construction, it was generally insensitive to traditional architectural elements.

The Facility Management Program of the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department is currently working on a sizable multiple property submission to the National Register of Historic Places that identifies these constructed products of federal intervention. Research for the nomination is being conducted by program supervisor Candi Helms and Emerson Begay, an intern currently attending Arizona State University. The nomination will include nearly 500 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) historically significant buildings and structures that were constructed from the late 1880s to the 1940s on Navajo land in Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Hogan style Baca (NM) Boarding School Building No. 205, 1935.

Most of the federally-constructed historic buildings are educational institutions. They stand as testimony to the federal government's policy to use education as the vehicle to assimilate the Navajo people into the Anglo society.

Pueblo Revival style Rock Point (AZ) Boarding School Building No. 409, c. 1935.

The buildings used to facilitate this policy, in most instances, were unsafe abandoned military buildings reused as schools. In the 1900s, these buildings were replaced with boarding schools that were reported to have "slavishly imitated white schools." It was obvious that the federal government was attempting to break the Navajo from their traditions by abandoning the Navajo's architectural heritage.

These school buildings and others nationwide were replaced after their incredibly poor and unsanitary conditions became known from the reports of the Senate Indian Investigating Committee and the 1928 Meriam Report. The investigations found that Navajo children attended class only four hours a day, spending the rest of their day working in the kitchen, laundry, or at heavy industrial tasks. The children lived in a regimented, military atmosphere. Conditions were often so crowded that children were crammed two to a bed in attics and abandoned buildings. Punishment often took the form of pure brutality as beatings were administered regularly for speaking Navajo.

John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, depended on the reports and the PWA to institute reforms which included a nationwide tribal school construction program. It is interesting that a New York firm, Mayers, Murray, and Phillips, was selected to design 33 tribal projects in 10 states. Facing rushed deadlines, the firm designed most of the buildings using the same floor

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Navajo Mountain (UT) Boarding School, double Hogan building, 1935.

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plans. The firm attempted to regionalize their architecture through the use of materials that seemed more appropriate for the various climates they encountered. However, traditional Native American building elements were generally excluded from their designs.

On Navajo land, approximately 50 school complexes were built consisting of one to three classrooms, a teachers' house, pumphouse, root cellar, shop, and maintenance building. The majority of the buildings were designed in the Pueblo revival style, a common style constructed in the Southwest under other PWA programs. The native sandstone buildings are generally one story, with flat parapeted roofs, vigas, canales, and wooden or stone lintels over and/or under the openings.

The buildings mimicked the Pueblo Native American type of architecture and very rarely exhibited characteristics of the traditional Navajo dwelling, the hogan. The one tradition sporadically recognized was the orientation of the buildings toward the easterly sun.

Chinle Agency (AZ) administrative headquarters building, recreation hall, 1914.

The Council House, located in Window Rock, is the only PWA building on Navajo land that reflects an attempt to incorporate more of the traditional elements. The aspiration to capture Navajo architecture was guided by Collier who envisioned the tribal chamber as the architectural impression of political unity between the Navajo and the federal government. The easterly facing building was constructed on an octagonal plan similar to a hogan with a windowless northside in deference to the belief that the nonliving gain entrance to a dwelling from the north. Despite Collier's intention, however, the building was a constant reminder of the federal government's presence in Navajo affairs and a reminder of the endless strife to be experienced as the building faced the allegedly cursed Window Rock formation.

The government believed the building program under the Roosevelt administration remedied their past insensitivity. Yet, they had actually imposed on a people an architectural design that, for the most part, lacked the architectural characteristics of the Navajo culture.

The multiple property submission not only documents these and other examples of historic federal architecture,

Tuba City (AZ) Boarding School. Photo courtesy Special Collections Library, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ.

but records the historic federal-Navajo relations that has impacted the constructed landscape. This type of documentation is crucial to understanding why the constructed landscape appears as it does, why, due in part to federal intervention, Navajo traditions are so important and widely practiced today, and why the Navajo strongly maintain tribal sovereignty. When the nomination is completed, it will be submitted to each of the boarding

Original BIA Navajo Area Director's house, Window Rock, AZ, 1936.

and high school locations as well as the local community college to aid teachers in disseminating information about this powerful association of the people and government.

Candi Helms is the architectural historian and Facility Management Section supervisor for the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department. This article is a condensed version of a paper presented at the Navajo Studies Conference in Window Rock, AZ, May 11-14, 1992. For more information about the historic buildings of the Navajo Nation, please write Candi at Box 2898, Window Rock, AZ, 86515, or call 602-871-7136 or 6437.